

LIFE in the COLONIES in the 17th century

Homes in Colonial New England

The first houses in New England were simple wooden huts. They had timber frames covered in clapboard with thatched roofs. Rather than glass windows had sheets of paper soaked in oil. The first chimneys were of logs covered in plaster - an obvious fire hazard! The earliest houses were crowded, dark and drafty.

However people soon built more substantial houses. As they grew more prosperous they added new rooms. They also replaced oiled paper with glass windows.

In the late 17th century the main room in a prosperous New England home was called the keeping room. It was used as a living room and a dining room. In it carpets were placed on tables (they were too valuable to put on the floor!). Chairs were a luxury and often only dad had one. The rest of the family sat on benches. They used chests for storage.

In New Amsterdam buildings were, at first, made of wood but in time houses of stone or brick were erected. Thatched roofs were banned in 1657 (because of the risk of fire). Dutch settlers built houses in the same style as those at home.

Colonial Food and Drink

In the 17th century it was not safe to drink water, it was too dirty. At first colonists were forced to use corn to make an alcoholic drink. Later beer and cider were common. For the wealthy wine and brandy were imported. For ordinary people rum became a popular drink in the late 17th century. In the 18th century tea became popular.

In the early 17th century colonists relied mainly on corn for food. It was made into bread or mush or was eaten with beans in a meal called succotash. Later in the 17th century other grains like rye, wheat and barley were grown. Colonists also grew vegetable like onions, turnips, parsnips and carrots. If meat was available stew was a popular meal.

In the 17th century few people used forks although they became common in the 18th century. In the 17th century it was common for two or more people to share a wooden plate called a trencher.

Clothing in Colonial New England

At the beginning of the 17th century men wore starched collars called ruffs. Women wore frames made of wood or whalebone under their dresses. However the farthingale was soon discarded and the ruff evolved into a large lace collar (for those who could afford it!).

In the 17th century men wore knee length garments called breeches. They also wore stockings and boots.

On the upper body men wore linen shirts. In the early 17th century they wore a kind of jacket called a doublet with a cape on top. Men wore their hair long. They also wore beards.

In the late 17th century a man's doublet became a waistcoat and men wore a frock coat over it. With breeches it was rather like a three-piece suit. Men were now clean shaven and they wore wigs.

Women wore a linen garment called a shift. Over it they wore long dresses. The dress was in two parts the bodice and the skirt. Sometimes women wore two skirts. The upper skirt was gathered up to reveal an underskirt.

Work in Colonial New England

Most people in New England lived by farming. It was back breaking work and usually lasted from dawn to dusk. However in the south by the 18th century great plantations existed alongside the many small farms. From 1612 tobacco was grown in Virginia and in 1619 the first black slaves arrived. At first slaves were rare but during the late 17th century they became more and more common especially in the south.

In North America there were the same craftsmen found in Europe such as carpenters, coopers, tanners, millers and blacksmiths. There were also apothecaries who sold drugs.

17th Century Medicine

During the 17th century operations were performed by barber-surgeons. Their knowledge of anatomy improved. Medicine also improved. In 1628 William Harvey published his discovery of how blood circulates around the

body. Doctors also discovered how to treat malaria with bark from the cinchona tree.

However medicine was still handicapped by wrong ideas about the human body. Most doctors still thought that there were four fluids or 'humors' in the body, blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. Illness resulted when you had too much of one humor. Nevertheless during the 17th century a more scientific approach to medicine emerged and some doctors began to question traditional ideas.

The average life span in the 17th century was shorter than today. Average life expectancy at birth was only 35. That does not mean that people dropped dead when they reached that age! Instead many of the people born died while they were still children. Out of all people born between one third and one half died before the age of about 16. However if you could survive to your mid-teens you would probably live to your 50s or early 60s. Even in the 17th century some people did live to their 70s or 80s.

LIFE in the COLONIES in the 18th century

At first life was hard and rough in the North American colonies. However by the early 18th century people in the American colonies lived in houses as comfortable as those in Europe. Wealthy people had finely carved furniture, wallpaper, china, silver and crystal and chairs were common. In 1742 Benjamin Franklin invented a kind of metal stove.

Of course, for the poor things were different. Their houses were often small and crowded and their furniture was basic. They could not afford luxuries like silver but some ordinary people had pewter, which was sometimes called poor man's silver.

On the frontier in the 18th century life was very rough and people often lived in log cabins.

Food and Drink in Colonial America

Beer and cider were common. For the wealthy wine and brandy were imported. For ordinary people rum became a popular drink in the late 17th century. In the 18th century tea became popular. People also drank chocolate. The first chocolate factory in America opened in 1765 in Massachusetts.

In the 18th century grains like rye, wheat and barley were grown. Colonists

also grew vegetable like onions, turnips, parsnips and carrots. In the 18th century they grew potatoes. If meat was available stew was a popular meal. People in 18th century America also ate ice cream.

Clothing in Colonial America

In the 18th century men wore breeches and stockings. They also wore waistcoats and frock coats. They wore linen shirts. Both men and women wore wigs and for men three-cornered hats were popular. Men wore buckled shoes.

Women wore stays (a bodice with strips of whalebone) and hooped petticoats under their dresses. Fashionable women carried folding fans.

Fashion was very important for the wealthy but poor people's clothes changed very little.

Work in Colonial America

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By the 18th century most towns had specialized trades such as gunsmiths, locksmiths, clock and watch-makers, silversmiths and cabinet makers.

In the north shipbuilding flourished in the 18th century and there were many shipwrights, caulkers, rope makers, block makers and sail makers.

By 1700 most towns also had a sawmill powered by water. In the North American colonies lumber was abundant. So were streams and rivers.